

The Cover-up of the Mentions to the Castes in Bhagavad Gītā

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May/2018

The Problem in Translating Ancient Texts

In view of the very small number of readers who know the ancient languages, many think that translating an ancient text is as easy and simple as translating from a modern language to another modern language, such as translating from English into Spanish or into Portuguese. Since translations from the modern languages to other do not pose any problems, as many translators have skillfully master this task, since some translators are even graduated and/or specialized in translations, readers often think that the same is true of the translations of the ancient texts, so do not bother to compare translations, therefore they attach only to the first one that came to hand. This occurrence is very common among religious, whose concern to compare the different translations of their sacred books does not happen, clinging only to the version that their leaders advise.

However, the reality of translations of ancient works is very different from that of contemporary books. Those few who had the curiosity to compare the translations of the same ancient work are surprised by the divergences found in the different versions. The intriguing thing is that, even so, these divergences are not enough concerns for these scholars, so that they disregard them as serious problems, so the fact is unknown to the vast majority of readers.

On the other hand, the recent resources of the internet provided tools for quick and agile work of comparing translations. For example, the website

BibleGateway displays about 200 different translations of the Bible in 64 languages. The ones with more versions are those in English with 58 different versions and in Spanish with 19 versions, so that it is possible to compare them online. From there it is curious to realize how much one translation diverges from the other, a task that earlier was more difficult because of the inexistence of this electronic resource.

Reasons for Different Translations

Without the readers knowing, often the differences in the translations do not happen due to the fact of a translator to translate a same work different from another translator. The divergences are sometimes not in the translation itself, but rather in something independent of the translation, that is, the translators have used different editions, recensions, manuscripts, versions or revisions of the same work. The same work with different manuscripts and different recensions was very common in Antiquity and in Middle Ages. These differences were the main causes for the consolidation of religious sects in the past.

For example, the Bible has gone through numerous revisions to date, so the following names for these editions: Modern English Version (MEV), New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), etc., to exemplify only a few in the English language. Only in English, there are more than 50 versions.

In the Vedic antiquity of India, the different accounts of the Vedic texts led to the formation of

various Vedic sects (*shākhās*).¹ Then in the *Mahābhāshya* of *Patāñjali*² are mentioned the existence of 1,131 *shākhās* (Vedic sects) in the past, being 21 of the *Rg Veda*, 101 of the *Yajur Veda*, 1,000 of the *Sāma Veda* and 9 of the *Atharva Veda*. While the *Muktika Upanishad* mentions 1,180 sects (*shākhās*), 21 being from the *Rg Veda*, 109 from the *Yajur Veda*, 1,000 from the *Sāma Veda* and 50 from the *Atharva Veda*. However, of these sects (*shākhās*), only 11 *Samhitās* (collections of hymns) survived to this day: 01 of *Rg Veda* (*Shakala*), 05 of *Yajur Veda* (04 of Black *Yajur Veda*: *Kathaka*, *Kapisthala*, *Mantrāyaniya* and White and 01 of White *Yajur Veda* (*Vājasaneyī*), 03 of *Sāma Veda* (*Ranayaniya*, *Kauthuma* and *Jaiminiya*) and 02 of *Atharva Veda* (*Shaunaka* and *Paippalada*).

When differences occur in translation itself, the causes may be the translator's malpractice or the translator's intention to print in the translation his ideological interpretation. The latter is very common in religious translations, when the translator infiltrates in the translation his sectarian interpretation. Then, for the reader who does not know the original language of the text, it is only left to trust the translation before his eyes. That is why there are academic translations of religious texts that are impartial and try to rescue the original meaning of the work, independent of sectarianism, searching the meaning that the author intended to convey at the time of composition, regardless of

¹ Literally, the word शाखा-*shākhā* means “branch”.

² Probably an author different from the author of the known *Yogasūtras*.

what the later interpreters intended that the following generations believed to be the original meaning of the work. In other words, a translation free from preaching and indoctrination.

The Recensions of the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (भगवद्गीता), that is, गीता-*Gītā* (Chant) of the Lord (भागवन्- *Bhāgavan*), is the most popular text of Hinduism and therefore the most internationally known Hindu book, therefore the most translated to foreign languages. Its worldwide popularity was due in large part to the propagandist efforts of the *Hare Kṛṣṇa* Movement. For during the 1970s and 1980s, it was possible to find monks of this movement in every corner of the world, distributing this book in exchange for cash donation. It has already been translated into 75 languages around the world, only in English there are more than 300 translations (Davis: 2015: 08). Originally, it is an excerpt from Book VI (*Bishma Parva*), chapters 25-42, of the *Mahābhārata*, the Great Epic of India, which exposes a dialogue between the god *Kṛṣṇa* and the disciple *Arjuna*, just before the beginning of the Great Battle between the armies of the *Pāṇdavas* and *Kauravas*.

What is not lacking for the *Bhagavad Gītā* is praise, whether from Hindus or foreign admirers. "Shankara (788-820 CE) believed that this dialogue reaffirms the essential teachings of the eternal Vedas". Mahātma Gandhi said, "The *Kurukshetra*³ battlefield is located in the soul of all human beings,

³ Location where the Great Battle narrated in the *Mahābhārata* occurred.

where the eternal conflict between good and evil happens. The British writer and essayist Aldous Huxley considered the teachings of *Kṛṣṇa* in *Bhagavad Gītā* as the most systematic statement concerning the scriptures of a 'perennial philosophy', common to all the religions of the world" (Davis, 2015: 04). It is recognized by many Hindus as one of the five jewels (*pañcharatnāṇi*) of Sanskrit literature. However, the denomination of 'Hindu Bible', attributed by some Western authors, is imprecise, since, despite popularity, it must first be recognized that Hinduism is formed by countless heterogeneous currents, whose authority of the *Gītā* is not the same, therefore different from Christianity, where the authority of the Bible is consensual and uniform. That is, while in some sects the authority of the *Gītā* is supreme, examples: the vishnuist sects, already in some shivaists denominations, its authority is recognized, but its importance is secondary.

Gītā, as it is universally called, is known through three or four recensions.⁴ The first is the recension commented on by *Adi Shankarāchārya* (788-820 CE), which, over time, has become the commonly accepted recension (*textus receptus*). Its text houses eighteen chapters in 700 shlokas (or 701).⁵ This is the text that almost everyone knows.

⁴ If we do not consider the recensions different from the *textus receptus* (accepted text) as frauds.

⁵ The difference of a verse (*shloka*) happens because some editions include an additional verse in chapter XIII verse 01, said by *Arjuna*, based on the edition *Kumbakonam* of the *Mahābhārata*. Among the translations consulted, the following translators included this verse: Nikhilananda, 1944: 283; Radhakrishnan, 1949: 300; Swarupananda, 1967: 288; Das,

The other is the Kashmir recension, also with 18 chapters, but with 716 verses, more publicly known through the publication by F. Otto Schrader in 1930 (Belvalkar, 1941: 18, Edgerton, 1996: xiii, Sharma 1983, Sankaranarayanan, 1985 and Bagchee, 2016). A third can be considered a recension if we accept the version of the followers of *Yādavaprakāsha* (a seventh-century vedantine master), also with 18 chapters, but with nine (or ten) additional verses, mentioned in the *Tātparyachandrikā* by *Vedānta Deshika* (Sampatkumaran, 1985: 520-2). Finally, the recension of the *Suddha Dharma Mandalam*, with 26 chapters in 745 verses, English translation published in 1939 (Row, 1939; analyzed by Bagchee, 2016). The first three are very close in order and arrangement of chapters and verses, while the SDM recension differs almost entirely, especially in the number of chapters (26) and verses (745).⁶ On the other hand, the writing of the common verses is almost identical in the four recensions. I say almost identical, for in fact there are small variants in the redactions of some verses of the *Gītā*, when we confront different manuscripts and different editions. M. R. Sampatkumaran related 67 variants (1985: 320-3), while B. Bhagavan Das listed 25 variants and commented on them (1979: 331-6), also F. Otto Schrader pointed out 282 editorial variants between the *Gītā*

1979: 233; Niketan, 2003: 267; Prabhupada, 2004: 652; Aurobindo, 2004: 30 and Theodor, 2016: 103.

⁶ The additional verses of the SDM recension are taken from passages of *Mahābhārata*. For further study, see: Bagchee, 2016.

of Kashmir and the text accepted (*textus receptus*) of the *Gītā* (Bagchee, 2016, for further study, see: Belvalkar, 1941: 18). In the evaluations of Joydeep Bagchee and Vishwa Adluri, both recensions, Kashmir and SDM, are recent forgeries. About the SDM (*Hamsayogin*) recension, they stated: "The *Hamsayogin's Gītā* (SDM) is not read today and is widely considered to be a fake", they also called SDM *Gītā* of "Theosophic *Gītā*" because of so elaborate metaphysical support for the division of chapters and the meticulous arrangement of verses (Bagchee, 2016).

With little welcome from other authors, Phulgenta Sinha proposed that the original *Gītā* possessed only 84 *ślokas* (verses), rather than 700 (or 701). For him, the original text began in chapter I verse 28 and ended at the end of chapter III, that is, III.43, so that 616 (or 617) verses are interpolations. However, strictly from I.28 to III.43 there are 133 verses, so P. Sinha still discarded 49 more verses in this initial section (Sinha, 1987: 153s). Therefore, while the greatest mistrust is that, over time, the text of *Gītā* has grown in extension with the successive interpolations of anonymous authors, the recensions of Kashmir, SDM, and Yādavaprakāsha propose longer texts, which set against the search for the shorter original *Gītā*, free from later additions. One claim of those who advocate the process of additions is that the *Gītā* was initially a treatise of *Samkhya-Yoga* non-sectarian, which was later interpolated with ideas of the *Vedānta* system in order to transform it into a vedantine text, so that the first chapters dealing with *Samkhya-Yoga* represent the original passages, while the following passages, loaded with vedantine

ideas, are late interpolations (for more suggestions on the origin of *Gītā*, see: Radhakrishnan, 1949: 14-5 and Sinha, 1987: passim).

However, this interpretation is not currently recognized by the leading scholars of *Gītā*, although it is still a hypothesis to think. The difficulty is due to the absence of manuscripts, records and documents on *Gītā* that precede *Shankara's* commentary. The proponents of extended hypothesis rely on short mentions in the *Mahābhārata* on different numbers of chapters and verses of *Gītā*. The two recensions published in the last century (Kashmir and SDM), announced as older than *Shankara's* (*textus receptus*), did not solve the problem, since both presented clear signs of attempt to correct textual defects (especially SDM) and redaction defects (especially Kashmir) of the current recension, since the text of the *Gītā* has received additions from several hands at different times, hence the evidence of recent forgeries (for a deeper understanding, see: Bagchee, 2016: passim).

The attribution of authorship to K. D. Vyāsa is pure mythology. The date of its composition, the way it was composed and the authorship are still reasons for discussion among researchers. As to the time of composition, Richard H. Davis remarked: "Most scholars agree that the *Bhagavad Gītā* was composed in northern India at some moment in the classical period between the reign of King *Ashoka* (reigned 269-232 BCE) and the Gupta dynasty, 320-547 CE" (Davis, 2015: 06), mainly because of its Sanskrit stylistics (Sargeant, 2009: 03s), as part of a larger composition, the epic poem *Mahābhārata*. That the composition of the

Gītā is the result of a long process of additions by anonymous authors, with the intention of transforming it into a compendium that brings together themes from different Hindu currents, whose interpolations were no longer added after the commentary of *Sri Shankarāchārya* (788-820 CE), by which time this commented version became the accepted text (*textus receptus*) of almost the entire Hindu community. One of the clearest examples of interpolations in *Gītā* is the presence of a considerable number of verses and phrases taken from the *Upanishads*, literally reproduced. Example: *Gītā* III.42 and *Katha Upanishad* III.10. A strong suspicion of additions to the text is that the dialogue took place just before the beginning of a battle, when the soldiers were ready for combat and eager to fight, so there would be no patience to wait for a long dialogue of 700 *ślokas* (or 701). Most likely, the first composition should have been a much shorter text.

The Hindu Caste System

Many peoples of the past had their societies divided and regulated by caste⁷ systems, but none attained sophistication, detail, rigidity in regulation, and long duration as the Hindu caste system.

The life of the Hindu is regulated by the *Varnāshramadharma* (वर्णाश्रमधर्म), that is, the Law (*Dharma*) which regulates the Four Stages of Life

⁷ According to Louis Dumont, the English and French noun "caste" is of Portuguese and Spanish origin, "caste", in the original sense of "pure", derived from the Latin "*casta*" (masculine: *castus*), pure, holy, virtuous (Dumont, 1999: 21).

(*Āshramas*), as well as the division and conduct of the castes (*Varnas*). In this way, Hindu discipline can be divided into two spheres: the personal (or family) sphere and the social (or occupational) sphere.

The first sphere, the personal, is the *Āshrama Dharma*, in which the life of the Hindu disciple is prescribed through four stages of his life. The first stage is that of *Brahmachārī* ब्रह्मचारी (celibate student), when the young Hindu lives as a celibate student under the guidance of a guru. The second stage is that of the *Grhastha* गृहस्थ (householder), after completing the stage of celibate student, the Hindu marries, forms a family, rears children and works to support the family. The third stage is that of the *Vānaprastha* वनप्रस्थ (resident in the forest), when the Hindu, after rearing children, detaches himself from the family to dwell in the forest (*vāna*) and devotes himself to religious rites and practice of meditation. The fourth and last stage is that of the *Sannyāsī* संन्यासी (ascetic), when the disciple totally renounces worldly life in order to devote himself exclusively to religious practices. The *Manusmṛiti* thus defines, "The Student (*Brahmachārī*), the Householder (*Grhastha*), the Hermit (*Vānaprastha*) and the Ascetic (*Sannyāsī*), these are the Stages of Life (*Āshramas*)" (VI.87 - Bühler, 1993: 214; Jha, 1920-39: vol. V, 260 and Board of Trustees, 1904: 221-2).

The second sphere, social and occupational, is that of the caste (वर्ण-*varna*), classified hierarchically, with the caste of priests (ब्राह्मणाः-*Brāhmanāh*) at the top of the social hierarchy. Its occupants are priests, teachers,

intellectuals and thinkers. Then, in the hierarchical order, the क्षत्रियाः (*Kshatriyas*) appear, this is the caste of the military, of the kings, the nobles, the administrators and the rulers. The third caste is the वैश्याः (*Vaishyas*), the caste of farmers and traders, and finally, at the base of the hierarchical pyramid, the caste of the शुद्राः (*Shūdras*), the caste of the manual laborers and the servants. The members of the first three (superior) castes have the right to initiation *Upanāyana* (उपनायन), the sacred thread⁸ vesting ceremony. This initiation is a second birth for the Hindu, which happens to be called *Dwijah* (द्विजः), which means, twice born. The *Shūdra* does not have the right to this initiation, so it cannot use the sacred thread, consequently, it is not a 'twice born'. One of the Law Codes explains: "There are four classes (castes): *brahman*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya* and *shūdra*. Among these, each preceding class is higher by birth to each subsequent class" (*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, I. 01.04 and 05 - Olivelle, 1999: 07).

Below the *shūdras*, in Hindu society, there are 'without castes', also known as 'untouchables' (outcasts), because of their high degree of impurity, so they cannot touch or be touched by any caste members. The *Manusmṛti* thus defines, "*Brahman*, *kshatriya*, and *Vaishya* are the castes of the Twice Born (*dwijāh*), but the fourth (caste), the *shūdra*, has only one birth; there is no fifth caste" (X.04 - Bühler, 1993: 402 and Jha, 1920-39: vol VII, 249). The

⁸ Strictly speaking, they are three interwoven threads representing the various trinities that exist in the universe: *Sat-Chit-Ānanda*, *Brahma-Shiva-Vishnu*, *Satwa-Rajas-Tamas*, *Gnāna-Icchā-Kriyā*, etc.

excessive preoccupation of the Hindus with purity is somewhat paranoid and, at the same time, paradoxical, since their temples are filthy, as well as their most sacred river, the Ganges, is a filth too.

The earliest mention of the four castes appears in the *Purusha Sūkta* (पुरुषसूक्त- Hymn to Universal Man) reproduced in the *Rg Veda* X.90.11-2, in the White *Yajurveda* (*Vājasaneyi Samhitā*) XXX.10-1 and in the *Atharva Veda* XIX.06.05-6:

"When they sacrificed the *Purusha*, in how many parts did they divide it? How did they call his mouth, his arms, his thighs, and his feet"? (*Rg Veda*, X.90.11).

"His mouth became the Brahmin, his arms became the *Rajanya* (*Kshatriya*), his thighs became the *Vaishya*, the *Shūdra* was born of his feet" (*Rg Veda*, X.90.12).⁹

Notice that the upper castes came from the upper parts of the body, while the lower castes came from the lower parts.

The Sanskrit term for caste is *varna* (वर्ण), which means "color". The reason for this meaning can be found in the earliest Hindu texts. The Vedas oppose the light-skinned Aryan invaders (आर्याः) of their black-skinned enemies (*Dāsas* and *Dasyus*) (त्वचमसिक्नीं-*twachamasiknīm*).¹⁰ *Rg Veda* IX.73.05 mentions, "Those of dark skin (*twachamasiknīm*)

⁹ The translations of these verses by Ralph T. H. Griffith and H. H. Wilson differ in some details; I preferred the translation of the latter (Wilson, 1990: vol. VI, 314). This myth of the creation of the four castes from the *Purusha* (Universal Man) is confirmed in the *Manusmṛti*, I.31 and 87; X.45.

¹⁰ Composite word derived from त्वच्-*twach* (skin) and असिक्नी-*asiknī* (dark-colored, black).

hated by *Indra*" (Wilson, 1990: vol. 05, 526). In another passage (IX.41.01), of the same text, the dark-skinned ones are called *krshna twach* (black skin): "... turning aside the black skin (कृष्णाम् त्वचम्-*krshnām twacham*)" ¹¹(Wilson, 1990: vol 05, 454). In IV.16.13, the following feat of *Indra* is mentioned: "... thou that hath slain fifty thousand negroes (कृष्णानि-*krshnāni*) ..." (idem: vol. 03. 209). In passage I.130.08, *Indra* defends his Aryan worshipers (*āryas*) and plucks the black skin (*twacha krshna*) from the aggressors (idem: vol.2, 30). In the Codes of Laws (*Dharmasūtras*), the terms *krshna twach* (black skin) is replaced by *krshna varna* (black color): "The sin that a *Brahman* commits (is extinguished) serving a person of black color (*krshnam varnam*) ..." (*Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, I.27.11 - Olivelle, 1999: 38).

The Hindu system of caste and of pariah segregation was created on basis of skin color, thus initially a racial criterion, with light-skinned Aryans at the top of the social hierarchy, while natives, or descendants of natives, with dark skin, on the base. The color distinction was so important that later the word *varna* (color) assumed the meaning of caste. Over time, all these races were mixed forming a much larger number of sub-castes (*jātis*).¹² The

¹¹ Very well known as the name of the hero and of the incarnation *Vishnu*, the term *Krshna* also means "black, dark".

¹² The feminine noun *jāti* (जाति) literally means "birth", derives from the past participle जात (jāta), born, and from the verbal root जन् (jan) "to be born." By this noun, it is possible to realize the importance of the division of caste based on birth by the Hindus. The word *jāti* is also used in the sense of tribe, family, descendant and caste.

Manusmṛti devotes a long chapter to regulating the life and relations between the numerous mixed castes (X.01-73). Nowadays, with multiplication, the number of *jāṭis* (sub-castes) in India is uncountable, not even the Hindus can know them all.

Contrary Opinions

The caste system is very well drafted in the Law Codes, but in practice, there are cases in the Indian past of non-caste tribal leaders who proclaimed themselves *kshattriyas* after gaining military power (Srinivas, 1962: 65-6). The current Indian Constitution does not recognize it, but in practice, it is still practiced among the vast majority of the Hindu population, especially the more orthodox.

This unfair system of social division (castes and pariahs) based on birth is an affront, from beginning to end, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN on December 10, 1948. Even in its Preamble, this acclaimed Charter disavows discrimination through castes and pariahs: "Considering that the recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family and of their equal and inalienable rights is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (UDHR, Preamble § 01). Therefore, for this Charter, humanity is a great family and rights are equal to all, so it should not be divided into castes and outcasts. Article 1 is more direct: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (UDHR, article 01). Article 02, §

01 is even more direct: "Every human being has the capacity to enjoy the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, whether of race, color, sex, language, religion, public opinion or any national or social origin, wealth, birth, or any other condition" (UDHR, article 02, § 01). Regarding the strict occupational division for members of the Hindu castes and pariahs, article XXIII, § 01, recommends, "Every human being has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work ..." (UDHR, article XXIII, § 01).

Paradoxically, India has been a signatory to this Declaration since October 30, 1945, therefore, even before its official adoption by the UN on December 10, 1948. Because of the discriminatory and unfair character, many are those who consider the division of Hindus into castes and pariahs as "the most disastrous and evil of all human institutions", in other words, "it is the most harmful, inhuman and cruel social system that could be invented to curse the human race".

The Pretended Universality of *Gītā*

The religions founded until the 18th century CE had their original messages addressed to only one people, so they were ethnic religions. Some were initially proclaimed to a people, but later universally disseminated, examples: Buddhism (originally for the Hindu people), Christianity (originally for the Jewish people), Islam (for the Arab people), etc. However, from the 19th century onwards, with the internationalization of the English language and the greater global knowledge, the

founders of universal religions began to emerge, who preached not only to one people but to all humanity. These new doctrines with universal messages were baptized by the historians of New Religious Movements.

In India, this occurrence was no different from other parts of the world, many Indian gurus began to understand that some of their doctrines and practices should not be limited to the Hindu people as they had a universal character. Then, a number of Indian gurus landed in the West, from the beginning of twentieth century on, bringing with them the Hindu doctrines decontextualized from the Hindu environment and adapted to the universal context. The culmination of this exchange took place during the Counterculture Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, when Eastern mysticism became a fad. Among the Hindu books, the one that most seemed to convey a universal doctrine was the *Bhagavad Gītā*, so it was the most publicized in the West. Undoubtedly, the new religion which most contributed to the universalization of *Gītā* was the *Hare Kṛṣṇa* Religion.

However, whether the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a universal text or an ethnic text is a discussion that divides the interpreters of this popular book to this day. That is, while some think that the *Gītā* announces a message to all mankind regardless of ethnicity, others understand that it is an eminently ethnic text, thus directed exclusively to the Hindu community. Then, on the basis of this discussion, we will then show the artifices used by the advocates of the universality of *Gītā*, so that it would appear as a universal text, through the cover-up of the passages where the particularities of Hinduism

are mentioned, thus attesting its direction to the Hindu ethnicity, being one of the most exclusive, the castes (वर्ण धर्म-*varna dharma*), based initially on the color (*varna*) of the skin, thus a racist and xenophobic system.

The Castes in *Gītā*

From ancient times, the most astute expedient to manipulate the understanding of a text has been to change the translation to the meaning the translator intends the reader to understand. Then, according to the translation in the hands of the reader, who does not know the Sanskrit language, he can immediately agree that *Gītā* is a book with a message that is not addressed to the Hindu people, but to all humankind. Then, we will show how the proponents of the universality of the *Gītā* covered up the mentions of the caste system (*varna dharma*), so that this book did not resemble an ethnically Hindu text.

An explicit reference to the Hindu caste system in *Gītā* appears in passage IV.13, where *Sri Kṛṣṇa* proclaims herself its creator, in the following phrase: चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं-*chāturvarnyam mayā sṛṣṭam*, which can be translated, without any interpretative accretion, "The four castes were created by me". However, some translators, in order to divert the explicit mention of the Hindu system of four castes in this passage, have translated it in an alternative sense. For example, Swami Prabhupada of the *Hare Kṛṣṇa* Movement, the major responsible for the international popularization of *Gītā*, translated the expression *chāturvarnyam* (the four castes) as "the four divisions of human society"

(Prabhupada, 2004: 288). In his commentary on this verse, he mentioned the names of the four Hindu castes, but he did not specify that they are a particularly Hindu creation, since for him these are the four divisions of human society, i. e.; the Hindu system is considered a division of all human society. However, the *chatur varnyam* is a system of caste division particularly Hindu and not of all human society. We know that other societies had or still have divisions of castes, classes, categories, etc., but each one was (or is) different from the other, and not always, in the number of four divisions.

Another translation of *Gītā* with universalist pretension, the recension of *Suddha Dharma Mandalam*, whose arrangement of chapters and verses is different from the common version, so the verse treated above appears in passage IV.07 (instead of IV.13), translated the phrase *chāturvarnyam mayā srshtam* as "by me the quaternary order was instituted ..." (Row, 1939: 34), without specifying what this "quaternary order" is, since there are countless quaternary orders in the world. This vague translation shows the underlying intention of covering up the mention of the Hindu system of four castes (*chāturvarnyam*).

Although an active combatant of caste discrimination, Mahātmā Gandhi translated *chāturvarnyam* as "the order of the four *varnas* (castes)", in the commentary of this passage, he explained the role of each caste following Hindu orthodoxy, but noted that the roles do not represent superiority of one caste over another. Now the curious thing is to note that the *shūdras* always perform the lower tasks, while the brahmins and *kshātriyas* perform the noblest tasks.

Sri Aurobindo translated *chāturvarṇyam* as "the fourfold order," and defined it as "the fourfold law of human activity" (Aurobindo, 2004: 11), also attempting to extend something as ethnic and peculiar to Hindu culture, as the *varṇas*, to something common to human activities in general.

The illustrious S. Radhakrishnan, former Oxford professor and former president of India, another defender of the universality of *Gītā*, also translated *chāturvarṇyam* as "quadruple order" and commented that *varṇa* is a class determined by temperament and vocation and not by birth (*jāti*) and heredity (Radhakrishnan, 1949: 160-1). Well, if so, why the name *varṇa* (color)¹³ for caste?

Virtues and Occupations

Unlike the previous passage, in the following passage it was not possible for proponents of the universality of *Gītā* to deform the translation in order to cover up the mention of the four castes, since the mentions are very explicit and specific. A passage with somewhat awkward writing, since in verses 42 and 43 the *karma* (कर्म) of the Brahmins and *Kṣhātrīyas* are listed as virtues, whereas, in verse XVIII.44, *karma* (कर्म) of the *Vaiśhyas* and *Shūdras* are listed as occupations. The pariahs (without castes) are scornfully omitted, conveying the idea that important are those who have a caste, while the outcasts are not important to society, as we shall see next. Also, the translation of the word *karma* is divergently translated, for it is translated as action (or actions), as duty (or duties) or as quality

¹³ More specifically, skin color.

(or qualities), so that in addition to the different meaning, some translate it into the singular, while others translate it into the plural.

Then, because of the difficulty in altering the translation, the universalist translators justified the mention of the four castes by commenting, explaining that in the *Gītā*'s view the occupations and virtues of the members of the four castes are not determined by birth, but rather by the individual nature (*swabhāva*) of each individual. Then, while some interpreters understand that *Gītā* preaches the orthodox Hindu view of the caste system, others interpret *Gītā* as having been revealed in order to bring a new interpretation of the caste social function, free of hereditary factor.

Verse XVIII.41 mentions the division of the actions (or duties) of the members of the four castes according to the natures (*swabhāva*) of each of them:

ब्राह्मक्षत्रियविशां शूद्रणां च परंतप ।

कर्माणि प्रविभक्तानि स्वभावप्रभवैर्गुणैः ॥ ४१ ॥

Brāhmanakshattriyaavishām shūdrānām cha paramtapa

Karmāni

pravibhaktāni

swabhāvaprabhabavairgunaih

"The actions (or duties) of the Brahmins, the *Kshātriyas*, the *Vaishyas* and the *Shūdras*, O *Paramtapa*¹⁴ (*Arjuna*), are divided by qualities (*gunas*) derived from their own nature (*swabhāva*)" (XVIII.41).

¹⁴ Literally translated, this compound word means, "mortifying" (तप-*tapa*) of "other" (पर-*param*), but more commonly translated "destroyer of the enemy."

Those who understand that *Gītā* is bound up with the traditional Hindu system of caste interpret the term *swabhāva* as the proper nature of one who was born in a particular caste, while the opponents of this view interpret that the *swabhāva* is in the proper nature of each individual, which is independent of its caste, so the *Gītā* does not preach a caste system based on birth and heredity. Therefore, someone is a Brahmin not because of his birth, but because of his virtues. S. Radhakrishnan commented on this verse thus: "the fourfold order (four castes) is not peculiar to Hindu society. It is of universal application. Classification depends on the types of human nature. Each of the four classes (castes) has certain well-defined characteristics, though they should not be understood as exclusive. They are not always determined by heredity". He further concluded: "The *Gītā* cannot be the sustenance of the prevailing social order with rigidity and confusion. It admits the theory of the four orders (castes) and enlarges its horizon and its meaning" (Radhakrishnan, 1949: 364). At the end of the commentary on this verse, he concluded: "The four classes (castes) are not determined by birth or by color, but by the psychological characteristics that fit us to define functions in society" (ibid: 365).

This verse and the following three, in which the qualities and occupations of castes are related, give room for this latter interpretation, but as we shall see in the more racist and xenophobic passages of the *Gītā* in the following section, the *Gītā* is not so distant of the orthodox Hindu caste system.

Verses XVIII.42-4 relate the behavior (*karma*) of each member of the four castes. Of the brahmins and the *kshātrīyas* are listed the virtues, whereas, strangely, the *vaishyas* and *shūdras* are mentioned their occupations, all under the name of कर्म: (*karma*).

Then the *brahmakarma* (action of the brahmin) is: serenity, self-control, austerity, purity, tolerance, righteousness, wisdom, knowledge, and faith. The *kshatramkarma* (action of the *kshatriya*) is: heroism, majesty, steadiness, ability, courage not to run away from battle, generosity and ability to govern. The *vaishyakarma* (action of the *vaishya*) is: agriculture, cattle breeding and trade. Service is the *shūdra karma*.

The pariahs (outcasts) are not mentioned, perhaps the author (or authors) of the *Gītā* did not consider them as persons, that is, only has dignity who has caste.

Endogamy and "Ethnic Adultery"

Of all the references to castes in *Gītā*, the most xenophobic are those mentioned in passages I.41-3, when *Arjuna* mentions his concern with the caste mixture (वर्णसंकरः:-*varnasamkarah*). For those who understand that *Gītā* does not preach a caste system based on birth (जातिधर्म-*jātidharma*) and heredity, nor on basis of race (वर्ण-*varna*, skin color), the following verses make clear the endogamic prejudice and the xenophobia of *Arjuna*.

अधर्माभिभवत् कृष्ण प्रदुष्यन्ति कुलस्त्रियः ।

स्त्रीषु दुष्टासु वार्ष्णेय जायते वर्णसंकरः ॥ ४१ ॥

Adharmābhibhavāt kṛṣṇa pradushyanti kulastriyah

Strīshu dushtāsu vārshneya jāyate varnasamkaraḥ
 "Of the predominance of illegality (*adharmā*), O *Kṛṣṇa*, the women of the family are corrupted; when women are corrupted, O *Vārshneya* (*Kṛṣṇa*), the mixture of caste (*varnasamkara*) is born (*jāyate*)" (I.41).

The mention here is about women who marry men of other castes, so ethnic purity is tarnished. The first line of verse I.42 condemns to hell those who promote caste mixing:

संकरो नरकायैव कुलघ्नानां कुलस्य च । ४२ ।

Samkaro narakāyaiva kulaghnānām kulasya cha
 "The mixture (of castes) brings to hell the destroyers of the family and the family also" (I.42).

Verse I.43 mentions the consequences of ethnic impurity in the caste laws (*जातिधर्माः-jātidharmāḥ*) and in the laws of the family (*कुलधर्माः-kuladharmāḥ*):

दोषैरेतैः कुलघ्नानां वर्णसंकरकारकैः ।

उत्साध्यन्ते जातिधर्माः कुलधर्माश्च शाश्वताः ॥ ४३ ॥

Doshairetaih kulaghnānām varnasamkarakārakaiḥ
Utsādhyanṭe jātidharmāḥ kuladharmāśchā
śāśhchatāḥ

"By the sins of the family destroyers, who create the mixture of caste (*varnasamkara*), the laws of caste (*jātidharma*) are destroyed and the eternal laws of the family also" (I.43).

Arjuna uttered the verses above in the first chapter when he was afraid of fighting, then warned *Kṛṣṇa* about what could happen with the death of thousands of soldiers, an event that will destroy many families due to the war. One of their fears was that, with the death of many warriors (*kshātriya*s),

the result would be their scarcity after the battle, which will lead women to marry men of other castes, thereby promoting caste mixing (*varnasamkara*). In short, the occurrence of something like "ethnic adultery."

According to the verses above, it is possible to see that *Arjuna* not only recognizes the Hindu system of castes (*varnadharma*) on the basis of birth (*jātidharma*), but also esteems it to the point of blaming those who promote caste mixture (*varnasamkara*) of "destroyers of the family" (*kulaghñāh*) and, what is even more xenophobic, condemn them to hell (*narakah*).

Swami Bhaktivedānta Prabhupada, the founder of the *Hare Kṛṣṇa* Movement and translator of the most internationally known version of *Gītā*, translated the expression mixture of caste (*varnasamkara*) as "unwanted progeny" (Prabhupada, 2004: 83).¹⁵ In the commentary on this verse, he sought to divert the sense of "caste mixture" to the sense of "adultery of women", that is, unwanted children are born by virtue of women's adulterous practices. In addition, he added the following misogynistic remark: "Just as children are too inclined to be deceived, women are equally prone to degradation. Then, both the children and the women need protection from the older members of the family. Occupied with religious practices, women will not be led into adultery". In addition, later: "... women are usually not intelligent and therefore are not trustworthy" (ibid: 83).

¹⁵ In his version of *Gītā*, verse I.41 appears in I.40.

S. Radhakrishnan sought to diminish the importance of these verses by claiming "the present caste system does not correspond to the ideal of *Gītā*", but translated varnasamkara as "caste confusion" (Radhakrishnan, 1949: 93). The *Gītā* of the *Suddha Dharma Mandalam*, although more extensive and with a different distribution of verses, omits these three verses, I.41-3, (Row, 1939). In the Kashmiri recensions edited by S. K. Belvalkar and S. Sankaranarayanan, these verses appear in the same position (I.41-3) of the common recension (Belvalkar, 1941: 23 and Sankaranarayanan, 1985: 11-2).

The passages above expose the cultural primitivism of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which recognizes the xenophobic division of a caste society based on skin color (*varna*), ignores the pariahs, prescribes ethnic discrimination and inbreeding, as well as imposes the distribution of occupations without the free choice of the worker. In addition, what is more inbred, the attribution of crime to that woman who marries someone from outside her caste, thus committing an "ethnic adultery", resulting in the destruction of the family and punishment for going to hell.

With such a discriminatory mentality as this, how can one believe that the *Bhagavad Gītā* conveys a universal and eternal message, as the preachers of his universality propose? For ethnic discrimination, endogamy and xenophobia contravene the provisions of two of the most widely accepted Charters among nations: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN, 1979),

especially in a time as globalized as today, with cosmopolitan populations.

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